

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs are two categories whose prototypical function is to qualify or modify the meaning of basic grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs. Adjectives and adverbs share important characteristics. Some words can be used as both adjectives and adverbs and some grammatical structures using adjectives or adverbs are very similar. There is a very large variety of grammatical constructions that use adjectives and adverbs, as there are many ways to qualify something. In some cases, the nouns or verbs that are qualified are omitted or implied, which means that adjectives and adverbs are sometimes used independently from nouns or verbs, and have a predicate or deictic value.

Adjectives

Adjectives are characterizers of nouns or pronouns. They can characterize nouns directly in the noun phrase, for example:

A heavy book

Or they can characterize the subject of the copula, a noun or a pronoun as in:

The book is heavy

It's heavy.

In all the examples above, *heavy* is an adjective. In English, adjectives are clearly differentiated from the other categories, especially nouns but also adverbs. Some adjectives can be used as adverbs (for example adjective in '*a fast car*' and adverb in '*to run fast*'), but morphology and syntax make a clear difference between adjectives, adverbs, and nouns. For example, 'happy' is an adjective, 'happiness' is a noun, 'happily' is an adverb. The class of adjectives is open in English, and it is easy to create new adjectives, especially using morphology: for example, the adjective "acceptable" can be derived from the verb "accept" using the suffix "-able".

In English, adjectives can be combined, following a very specific order, as in:

A small round black wooden box

Adjectives are not so easily characterized in other languages. In French, they are closer to nouns than in English. They use a system of agreement (number and gender) similar to that of nouns, and must be in agreement with the noun or pronoun that they modify. Moreover, unlike English, they can be used as nouns without a pronoun support. For example, you do not have to say: "*it's a big one*", you can use the adjective directly "*c'est un grand* (it's a big)". Finally, in French, adjectives can precede or follow the noun. The set of preposed adjectives and of postposed adjectives are mostly different. For the adjectives that can be in either position, the meaning induced by the adjective is different in each position. Preposed adjectives correspond to a limited and non-productive set, whereas postposed adjectives are an open set. As in English, adjectives are used with a copula when they modify a pronoun.

There are languages where adjectives are quite different from English or French. For example, in Hausa, a Chadic language spoken in Niger and Nigeria, adjectives correspond to a limited set of twelve elements.

babba	Big		qarami	small
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dogo	long, tall	qanqane	small
danye	fresh, raw, unripe	gajere	short
sabo	new	tsofo	old
baqi	black	fari	white
mugu	bad	ja	red

Other languages have similar characteristics. All Bantu languages have a rather small adjective class. This is not limited to languages from the Bantu family, and it is also the case for certain languages outside the African continent. Interestingly, the set of preposed adjectives in French is quite similar to the reduced set of adjectives in Hausa. It is as if in French there were two categories of adjectives, one similar to the Hausa one and the other similar to the English one.

Dixon describes how adjectives are expressed when no adjective category exists for a specific meaning:

“Some adjective-deficient languages express all adjectival concepts through intransitive verbs (as in the case of Chinese), others express some through nouns and some through verbs (for example, Hausa), and others invoke further means (Chinook renders adjectival concepts through the major classes Noun and Verb and the minor class Particle).”

Comrie explains what is meant by saying that in Chinese, adjectives are verbs. First, words denoting qualities and properties do not occur with a copula, so they can be considered as full verbs. For example, “mǎli hěn cōngmíng (Molly very intelligent)” would be translated as “Molly is very intelligent”. Secondly, qualities and properties are negated by the same particle as verbs, “bù”. Thirdly, ‘adjectives’ that modify a noun occur with the same particle “de” as verb phrases do. For example, “[kāixīn -de rén (happy nominalizer person)]” would correspond to “people who are happy (happy people)”. This means that adjectives in Chinese are rather a subclass of verbs than a separate category.

Adverb

Adverbs are one of the most heterogeneous categories in syntax. With adjectives, although their syntax may not be different from the syntax of nouns or verbs in some languages, the semantic value of the category is unambiguous and provides a clear understanding of what an adjective is. This not the case for adverbs. As suggested by Quirk et al., “it is tempting to say simply that the adverb is an item that does not fit the definitions for other word classes”. Wilmet makes similar comments about the status of adverbs in French. His comprehensive review of the literature showed that this point of view is widely shared. Wilmet concludes that the only solution is to define adverbs by extension, giving the list and characteristics of all words that are considered as adverbs. Quirk et al. in fact do the same for English in their grammar, but do not say so explicitly.

The basic function of adverbs is to modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs, but also other words and even whole sentences. The Greek and Latin origin of the adverb category (*adverbium*: word applied to the verb) explains why it is difficult to generalize the concept of adverb to all languages, especially non-Indo-European languages which are very different from Greek.

In English, there are three main types of adverbs: simple adverbs (just, only, well, ...), compound adverbs (somehow, therefore, ...), and derivational adverbs (oddly, interestingly, clockwise, ...). The first two types are closed classes, whereas the third category is an open class. It is easy, for example, to create adverbs from adjectives using the suffix '-ly'. In French, a similar typology exists: there is a set of basic adverbs that form a closed class, and it is possible to create adverbs easily from an adjective using the suffix '-ment', for example "*fort* (strong)" gives "*forte-ment* (strongly)".

In English, an adverb can be used to qualify a verb ("He *quite* forgot about it"), as a premodifier of an adjective or an adverb ("They are *quite* happily married"), or with a more peripheral relation to the sentence as a disjunct or a conjunct ("She has bought a big house, *so* she must have a lot of money"). This means that adverbs have clearly defined syntactic positions. Similar positions exist in French, and this explains how it is possible to change the category of a word and use it as an adverb. A preposition, or a pronoun, or a conjunction, will be changed to an adverb when used syntactically as an adverb. For example, in "*Jules a voté contre* (Jules voted against)", *contre* (against) is an adverb, whereas it is basically a preposition as in "*Jules est contre le mur* (Jules is against the wall)". English has exactly the same characteristics. This shows that, with the exception of the open-class subcategory of adverbs, adverbs are defined more by their syntactic and functional characteristics than by anything else. Any word that behaves syntactically as an adverb is an adverb, even if its use is metaphoric rather than basic. This explains why adverbs can be a garbage category, but also means that adverbs have a fundamental role in language.

Language acquisition

The development of adjectives and adverbs in young children's language starts very early because some of the most common and useful words for communication belong to this category. This is the case of "no" already understood by 90% and produced by 23% of English-speaking 12-month-olds. Similar values (understood: 96% and produced: 29%) are found for French-speaking 12-month-olds. In this context, "no", an adverb, could also be considered as an interjection because it has not yet any syntactic combinatory properties. Other adverbs appear very early in child development, such as for example "more", understood by 37% and produced by 9% of English-speaking 12-month-olds, and "encore (again)" understood by 56% and produced by 11% of French-speaking 12-month-olds. "More" is an adjective (or a determiner), or an adverb in English (depending on the context) and "encore (again)" is an adverb in French, but both words have a very similar function and use in children's speech, which emphasizes the connection between adjective and adverb, as both are modifiers. Often, what is modified is implied, as children can use the word in isolation to express their desire for a repetition of the situation of interest at the moment the word is produced. Other similar words are location adverbs such as "in" in English and "*dedans* (in)" in French. In English, these words can also be a preposition or a particle. In French, preposition and adverb have often different but related forms, for example the adverb "*dedans* (in)" and the preposition "*dans* (in)". This makes it easier to understand that children are not confusing categories, but using word forms that they hear in adverb positions.

Language disorders

There is not a lot of information about the use of adjectives and adverbs in language disorders. These words are not frequently included in language tests, as they are not easy to represent (and thus to test) and are often not considered as basic in language development. Some studies have targeted the production of adjectives in Spanish because there are specific features of the Spanish language that create problems for children with specific language impairment (SLI). The reason is that in Spanish, adjectives are marked for gender ('o' for masculine and 'a' for feminine) which must agree with the noun they modify. As gender is sometime opaque in Spanish, this generates errors in children's production: one ending is replaced by the other. This error pattern makes this an efficient marker of language difficulties for Spanish-speaking children.

Children with SLI can have problems with adverbs when they are used in grammatical structures and not only in isolation or simple two-word structures as in the early years of language acquisition. For example, negation does not only use words such as 'no' or 'not' but also uses negative auxiliary verbs with a contraction such as "doesn't" (e.g., "It doesn't fit"). This type of construction is difficult for children with SLI. In their study, 5-year-old children with SLI produced non-adult negative sentences (e.g., "It not fit"), which are not produced by normally-developing 5-year-olds, but that can be found in 2- to 3-year-old typically-developing children.

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Further readings

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Dixon, R. M. W. (1982). *Where have All the Adjectives Gone?: And Other Essays in Semantics and Syntax*. Walter de Gruyter.

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Cross references

Grammatical Development

language disorders in children,

morphology

Nouns and Pronouns

Syntactic Disorders

Syntax and Grammar